Not Even Wrong

The Situation at Columbia VII (and Harvard…)

Posted on April 14, 2025 by woit

The first good news I've heard so far: Harvard has announced that it will not cave-in the way Columbia did. The letter from their lawyers is the one Columbia's lawyers should have written, ending with:

> *[your letter] presents demands that, in contravention of the First Amendment, invade university freedoms long recognized by the Supreme Court. The government's terms also circumvent Harvard's statutory rights by requiring unsupported and disruptive remedies for alleged harms that the government has not proven through mandatory processes established by Congress and required by law. No less objectionable is the condition, first made explicit in the letter of March 31, 2025, that Harvard accede to these terms or risk the loss of billions of dollars in federal funding critical to vital research and innovation that has saved and improved lives and allowed Harvard to play a central role in making our country's scientific, medical, and other research communities the standard-bearers for the world. These demands extend not only to Harvard but to separately incorporated and independently operated medical and research hospitals engaging in life-saving work on behalf of their patients. The university will not surrender its independence or relinquish its constitutional rights. Neither Harvard nor any other private university can allow itself to be taken over by the federal government. Accordingly, Harvard will not accept the government's terms as an agreement in principle.*
>
> *Harvard remains open to dialogue about what the university has done, and is planning to do, to improve the experience of every member of its community. But Harvard is not prepared to agree to demands that go beyond the lawful authority of this or any administration.*

Harvard president Garber's statement is here, and includes:

> *The University will not negotiate over its independence or its constitutional rights.*
>
> *The administration's prescription goes beyond the power of the federal government. It violates Harvard's First Amendment rights and exceeds the statutory limits of the government's authority under Title VI. And it threatens our values as a private institution devoted to the pursuit, production, and dissemination of knowledge. No government—regardless of which party is in power—should dictate what private universities can teach, whom they can admit and hire, and which areas of study and inquiry they can pursue.*

I'm hoping that the Columbia trustees are looking at what Harvard is doing, starting to realize what a horrible mistake they've been making the past few weeks, and coming up with a plan to try and extricate themselves from the moral disaster they have gotten themselves into. A good place to start would be resignations of those responsible for this.

There is nothing in the Harvard statement about the other front in the war on universities, the campaign to deport students, often for exercise of their first amendment rights. In Columbia related news, a Palestinian student with a green card and 10 years residence in the US was arrested today, there's a detailed story at The Intercept.

There was a small demonstration in the center of campus midday today, largely organized by people from the medical school, see here for their demands that the university stand up to Trump. This is the first such demonstration on campus that I have heard of, hopefully it will be the start of a much larger movement by students, faculty and staff.

Update: The New York Times has a detailed article about the ongoing Trump campaign to attack Columbia and other universities.

Update: The Chronicle of Higher Education has an article which puts what has been going on at Columbia in context as an attempt to eradicate the influence of Edward Said. About the Trump demand letter and the cave-in, it notices the same thing that it took me a while to see:

> *A fight could have been waged, the pro bono talent was at hand, and a win was just a matter of time. One clue why that never materialized can be found in the letter itself, which bristled with Columbia-specific lingo. It seemed to have been fashioned by university insiders hammering out a to-do list in the backrooms of the White House, as Adam Tooze, a Columbia historian, noticed, describing the letter as essentially a set of "grievances from extremist alumni group chats, translated directly into federal policy."…*
>
> *The ukase from Washington in Columbia's case was not, as university leaders saw it, a crisis but an opportunity: "Things we needed to get done and were getting done, but now we've gotten done more quickly," said Ester R. Fuchs, co-chair of Columbia's antisemitism task force.*

Update: Evidently the Columbia administration would not allow press on campus to cover the faculty demonstration today. The local news organizations did get a helicopter up above campus to get video, and the faculty went outside the gates to hold a press conference.

Update: The Wall Street Journal reporters who have been writing articles from the point of view of the Trump panel have a long and detailed article about the panel here. They generally treat illegally defunding the universities as a clever if unusual tactic ("a brilliant stroke"), although do get this quote

> *"Cutting off the funding spigot is a nuclear-type weapon of enforcement," said Scott Schneider, an education lawyer in Austin. "It's outside the legal system and is a remarkable exercise of executive authority."*

A "remarkable exercise of executive authority" taking place "outside the legal system" is a very polite way of describing the workings of a Fascist dictatorship. The Fascist justification is that this is the "will of the people" and the WSJ has done polling to back this up:

> *In a Wall Street Journal poll that surveyed 1,500 registered voters by phone from March 27 through April 1, 48% favored withholding funds from universities for failing to protect Jewish students from antisemitism.*

Note that the poll question didn't seem to say anything about this being against the law.

The way the panel works is described as follows:

> *In its meetings, task force officials discuss strategies, legal tools, and news from student and alumni groups and university trustees that its members are connected to.*

It seems all too possible that "its members are connected to" one or more of the Columbia trustees and that would explain a lot. The Columbia board of trustees needs to remove any of its members who are working with the Trump panel.

Update: There's a late-night statement from the Columbia president. They're still negotiating with the Trump people, haven't reached any agreement:

> *Those discussions have not concluded, and we have not reached any agreement with the government at this point. Some of the government's requests have aligned with policies and practices that we believe are important to advancing our mission, particularly to provide a safe and inclusive campus community. I stand firmly behind the commitments we outlined on March 21, and all the work that has been done to date. Other ideas, including overly prescriptive requests about our governance, how we conduct our presidential search process, and how specifically to address viewpoint diversity issues are not subject to negotiation.*
>
> *To be clear, our institution may decide at any point, on its own, to make difficult decisions that are in Columbia's best interests. Any good institution must do that. Where the government – or any stakeholder – has legitimate interest in critical issues for our healthy functioning, we will listen and respond. But we would reject heavy-handed orchestration from the government that could potentially damage our institution and undermine useful reforms that serve the best interests of our students and community. We would reject any agreement in which the government dictates what we teach, research, or who we hire. And yes, to put minds at ease, though we seek to continue constructive dialog with the government, we would reject any agreement that would require us to relinquish our independence and autonomy as an educational institution.*
>
> *Like many of you, I read with great interest the message from Harvard refusing the federal government's demands for changes to policies and practices that would strike at the very heart of that university's venerable mission.*

On the issue of students losing their visas and being dragged off to prison, still no support for them. No mention of the student arrested today in Vermont. Instead there's a new International Student Hardship Fund from which students can apply for grants of from $1000-$2500 if they're having financial problems.

Update: I took a look at the demands sent to Harvard last Friday, hadn't realized they were different and much more extensive than the ones I had seen a week ago. They're not about anti-semitism, basically a demand that Harvard turn itself into Trump U. This makes me see Harvard actions yesterday not so much as a profile in courage, but as the only option they had. These were demands they couldn't give in to, and they had seen from Columbia's example what happens when you start giving into these people's demands (they just take more of your money away and make more demands).

Latest craziness from Trump this morning: wants to take Harvard's tax-exempt status away from it, because "it keeps pushing political, ideological, and terrorist inspired/supporting "Sickness""

This entry was posted in The Situation at Columbia. Bookmark the permalink.

7 Responses to *The Situation at Columbia VII (and Harvard…)*

B. Raskovic *says:*
April 14, 2025 at 2:40 pm

Columbia must follow Harvard's lead… Such a shame that it may, at best follow such a lead, versus lead as should be its role.

Paul Stevenson *says:*
April 14, 2025 at 5:23 pm

Some shade cast on Columbia, perhaps, in the statement "Neither Harvard nor any other private university can allow itself to be taken over by the federal government"

John Baez *says:*
April 14, 2025 at 7:55 pm

From the New York Times article, we see what's happening to concepts like "the rule of law" and "due process":

As he finished lunch in the private dining room outside the Oval Office on April 1, President Trump floated an astounding proposal: What if the government simply canceled every dollar of the nearly $9 billion promised to Harvard University?

The administration's campaign to expunge "woke" ideology from college campuses had already forced Columbia University to strike a deal. Now, the White House was eyeing the nation's oldest and wealthiest university.

"What if we never pay them?" Mr. Trump casually asked, according to a person familiar with the conversation, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the private discussion. "Wouldn't that be cool?"

Wayne *says:*
April 14, 2025 at 8:52 pm

More details on the arrest in Vermont — Mohsen Mahdawi, born and raised in the West Bank, taken into custody at what he thought was to be a naturalization meeting.

He is a practicing Buddhist, and was planning to enroll in Columbia's international relations school. He is a Green Card holder of ten years standing.

"You Have To Be Carefully Taught," they sang in South Pacific. But now we have Betar USA, and others, placing him on their personal deportation list in late January. Apparently their and similar opinions outweigh every other consideration.

https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/14/nyregion/columbia-student-palestinian-arrested-ice.html

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Former Strings Fan *says:*
April 15, 2025 at 12:27 am

The bravery and courage shown by Democratic politicians in this attack on academic freedom is exemplary.

I'm inspired by the actions of the likes of Torres, Harris, Pelosi, President Biden, and of course, Shapiro and Fetterman and others.

They've done so well.

Antibellows *says:*
April 15, 2025 at 11:10 am

Re: the WSJ poll showing that "48% favored withholding funds from universities for failing to protect Jewish students from antisemitism": what this actually shows is that Trump's belligerence doesn't enjoy majority support, even when its support is inflated by an obviously slanted polling question. (Some of the 52% might be open anti-semites, but other polling suggests that such people constitute a small minority.) Needless to add, from the fact that Trump's belligerence has minority support it doesn't follow that he's going to stop. This nightmare probably doesn't end with Trump coming to his senses… Re:

"Wouldn't that be cool?": long-time Trump observers will be reminded of his failed career as a developer, when he was notorious for refusing to pay contractors and suppliers.

Peter Woit *says:*
April 15, 2025 at 11:34 am

Antibellows,
Maybe a better wording for the WSJ question would have been "Do you think Trump should be able to take away money from anyone with the excuse "wouldn't that be cool?""
Given MAGA attitudes, I'm guessing that would get about 20%.

Real Peace Monger *says:*
Your comment is awaiting moderation.

April 15, 2025 at 4:55 pm

"Maybe a better wording for the WSJ question would have been "Do you think Trump should be able to take away money from anyone with the excuse "wouldn't that be cool?"" Given MAGA attitudes, I'm guessing that would get about 20%." -Pete Woit

It's not about "being cool", but being HONEST about groupthink pseudo-education:

"The very magnitude of the power over men's minds that a highly centralised and government-dominated system of education places in the hands of the authorities ought to make one hesitant before accepting it too readily."

– Professor F. A. Hayek, The Constitution of Liberty, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960, p. 379.

"The student … is accustomed to being told what he should believe, and to the arbitration of authority. … Ultimately, self-confidence requires a rational foundation. … we should face our tasks with confidence based upon a dispassionate appreciation of attested merits. It is something gained if we at least escape the domination of inhibiting ideas."

– Professor Cecil Alec Mace, The Psychology of Study, 1963, p90.

"Little Billy may become a scientist as earlier he might have turned priest, and know the sacred texts … The chromed apparatus is blessed by distant authority, the water thrice-filtered for purity, and he wears the white antiseptic gown … But the masses still move by faith. … I have fear of what science says, not the science that is hard-won knowledge but that other science, the faith imposed on people by a self-elected administering priesthood. … In the hands of an unscrupulous and power-grasping priesthood, this efficient tool, just as earlier … has become an instrument of bondage. … A metaphysics that ushered in the Dark Ages is again flourishing. … Natural sciences turned from description to a ruminative scholarship concerned with authority. … On the superstition that reduction to number is the same as abstraction, it permits any arbitrary assemblage of data to be mined for relations that can then be named and reified in the same way as Fritz Mauthner once imagined that myths arise. … Our sales representatives, trained in your tribal taboos, will call on you shortly. You have no choice but to buy. For this is the new rationalism, the new messiah, the new Church, and the new Dark Ages come upon us."

– Jerome Y. Lettvin, The Second Dark Ages, paper given at the UNESCO Symposium on "Culture and Science", Paris, 6-10 September 1971 (in Robin Clarke, Notes for the Future, Thames and Hudson, London, 1975, pp. 141-50).

"Scepticism is … directed against the view of the opposition and against minor ramifications of one's own basic ideas, never against the basic ideas themselves. Attacking the basic ideas evokes taboo reactions … scientists only rarely solve their problems, they make lots of mistakes … one collects 'facts' and prejudices, one discusses the matter, and one finally votes. But while a democracy makes some effort to explain the process so that everyone can understand it, scientists either conceal it, or bend it … No scientist will admit that voting plays a role in his subject. Facts, logic, and methodology alone decide – this is what the fairy-tale tells us. … This is how scientists have deceived themselves and everyone else … It is the vote of everyone concerned that decides fundamental issues … and not the authority of big-shots hiding behind a non-existing methodology. … Science itself uses the method of ballot, discussion, vote, though without a clear grasp of its mechanism, and in a heavily biased way."

– Professor Paul Feyerabend, Against Method, 1975, final chapter.

“Children lose interest … because a natural interest in the world around them has been replaced by an unnatural acceptance of the soundness of certain views, the correctness of particular opinions and the validity of specific claims.”

– David Lewis, You can teach your child intelligence, Book Club Associates, London, 1982, p. 258.

“Crimestop means the faculty of stopping short at the threshold of any dangerous thought. It includes the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunder-standing the simplest arguments … and of being bored or repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction. Crimestop, in short, means protective stupidity.”

– George Orwell, 1984 (Orwell’s “crimestop” = Herman Kahn and Barry Bruce-Briggs “Educated Incapacity”, in their 1972 book “Things to Come”!)

“After the war in the 1950’s, Guenther Schwab’s brand of environmentalism also played a fundamental role in the development of the green anti-nuclear movement in West Germany. The dropping of the atom bomb and the nuclear fallout of the Cold War helped to globalize the greens into an apocalyptic ‘peace’ movement with Guenther Schwab being one of its original spokesmen. The unprecedented destruction in Germany brought on by industrialized warfare never before seen in the history of the world only served to radicalize the German greens into an apocalyptic movement. Their hatred toward global capitalism became even more vitriolic precisely because the capitalists were now in charge of a dangerous nuclear arsenal that threatened the entire planet.”

– Mark Musser, “The Nazi Origins of Apocalyptic Global Warming Theory”, American Thinker, February 15, 2011.

Irving L. Janis, Victims of Groupthink, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1972:

“I use the term “groupthink” … when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.”(p. 9)

“… the group’s discussions are limited … without a survey of the full range of alternatives.”(p. 10)

“The objective assessment of relevant information and the rethinking necessary for developing more differentiated concepts can emerge only out of the crucible of heated debate [to overcome inert prejudice/status quo], which is anathema to the members of a concurrence-seeking group.”(p.61)

“Eight main symptoms run through the case studies of historic fiascoes … an illusion of invulnerability … collective efforts to … discount warnings … an unquestioned belief in the group’s inherent morality … stereotyped views of enemy leaders … dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members … self-censorship of … doubts and counterarguments … a shared illusion of unanimity … (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, augmented by the false assumption that silence means consent)… the emergence of … members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions.”(pp.197-8)

“… other members are not exposed to information that might challenge their self-confidence.”(p.206)

“You must here distinguish – especially in teaching – the science from the forms or procedures that are sometimes used in developing science. … great religions are dissipated by following form without remembering the direct content of the teaching of the great leaders. In the same way, it is possible to follow form and call it science, but that is pseudo-science. In this way, we all suffer from the kind of tyranny we have today in the many institutions that have come under the influence of pseudoscientific advisers. … We have many studies in teaching, for example, in which people make observations, make lists, do statistics, and so on … They are merely an imitative form of science … The result of this pseudoscientific imitation is to produce experts, which many of you are. …. As a matter of fact, I can also define science another way: Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts.”

– Richard P. Feynman, “What is Science?”, presented at the fifteenth annual meeting of the National Science Teachers Association, 1966 in New York City, published in The Physics Teacher Vol. 7, issue 6, 1968, pp. 313-320.

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